

Man Up to Stop Violence Against Women: Uganda

“Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. It can include physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse and cuts across boundaries of age, race, culture, wealth and geography.”

— Man Up Campaign

James Byarugaba



While a student at Makerere University in Kampala, James Byarugaba began to learn about gender and human rights. He discovered that “the cost of gender inequality is huge” and made a commitment to raise awareness about the value of equality.

In 2010, Byarugaba learned about the [Man Up](#) campaign, a collaboration of the Clinton Global Initiative and Vital Voices Global Partnership. At the group’s youth summit in Johannesburg that year, he met other youth who shared his commitment to equality and to ending violence against women and girls. “I realized I was not fighting alone,” says the 33-year-old, who also serves as a lecturer in project planning and management at Makerere.

Byarugaba has put his commitment to work through the nonprofit group Youth Alive Uganda. He says Youth Alive has been successful at ending violence against women in communities they work in because it:

- Incorporates gender into all its programs, which include skills development and health care.
- Started peer support groups for young people. About 100 groups with 50 members each meet with parents’ associations, teachers, religious leaders and men’s and women’s groups around the country to talk about the benefits of gender equality. “Working with community men’s groups has helped reduce sexual and physical violence against women,” Byarugaba says.
- Promotes gender equality and an end to gender-based violence to school officials. That has resulted in some schools adopting child protection policies, providing separate toilets for girls and boys, and, in some instances, changing rooms and sanitary pads for girls.
- Provides teen-oriented prenatal sessions where young mothers can share their experiences and challenges.
- Partners with local institutions and governmental bodies to mobilize logistical and financial support for gender equality efforts.

Members of the Man Up campaign in Uganda get the message out.



“My vision is one world ... where boys and girls and men and women have the same opportunities and are empowered to contribute equally in shaping the world they want,” Byarugaba says. “My vision is of a violence-free world where no human being owns the other or inflicts harm based on one’s gender.”


Learn about more ways to get involved at yali.state.gov/16days and [pledge](#) today to help end Gender-Based Violence.

Man Up to Stop Violence Against Women: Burundi

“Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. It can include physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse and cuts across boundaries of age, race, culture, wealth and geography.”

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Thierry Kajeneza grew up witnessing women and girls being raped, forced into prostitution and sent out alone to collect water and firewood and to look for food.

Thierry Kajeneza, front center, and a  colleague tell rural women in Burundi about their rights.

“I saw how women were not invited like men to speak out about their problems and about what they could contribute to the construction of Burundi” after a long civil war, Kajeneza, a 35-year-old human rights activist and YALI Network member, recalls.

That impression pushed Kajeneza and a colleague to establish [ICIRORE C’AMAHORO](#) in 2007. The Ngozi province-based group advocates for human rights, especially for women and girls. It wants to help young people avoid the mistakes of previous generations and learn to become leaders.

ICIRORE C’AMAHORO, which means “mirror of peace” in Kirundi, reaches out to young women and men to help spread its messages to the wider public. It runs youth clubs in schools throughout the country and started a youth camp. It organizes gatherings that give young men and women opportunities to talk about gender issues. And it encourages women to form support networks and learn financial skills.

The organization’s strategy includes finding opportunities in the community where husbands and wives can work together to make decisions, then discuss why each decision was made. That encourages “a safe environment for women to express themselves and allows both husbands and wives to recognize the power of working together ... in the workplace, at home and in the community,” Kajeneza says.

Kajeneza notes that Burundi’s national and local governments have “responded positively” to ICIRORE’s work. Local authorities help inspire residents to attend ICIRORE’s meetings and training

sessions. The national government gave ICIRORE the land on which it is constructing offices.

The international community also has responded. In 2010, the civil rights advocate was invited to the Man Up Young Leaders Summit in Johannesburg. A collaboration of the Clinton Global Initiative and Vital Voices Global Partnership, the [Man Up](#) campaign motivates youth to help stop violence against women and girls and advance gender equality.

Kajeneza follows the YALI Network on Facebook and says he likes “knowing other young people who are involved in many domains of leadership.” He advises members to use social media to share information about what they are doing to end violence against women.

“This issue of gender violence will be solved if we all stand together. ... The world will become a village where men and women will live in harmony,” Kajeneza says.

Take your pledge today for how you will help end violence against women and girls in your communities at yali.state.gov/4her.


Create Opportunities, Take Others Along

By Edda Zekarias, Addis Ababa

At the 24th African Union Summit in Addis Ababa in January, the AU heralded 2015 as the Year of Women’s Empowerment and Development toward Africa’s Agenda 2063.

We speak the same language

Speaking to 500 young Africans attending the inaugural summit of the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders last summer, U.S. first lady Michelle Obama passionately asked for youth’s best efforts to change the disheartening plight of many girls and women in Africa who often, and not by choice, miss out on opportunities.

More than 5,000 women participated in 
Ethiopia’s 2015 Women First run to
mark International Women’s Day on March 8.

“This is where Africa’s future lies — with those women-run businesses, with those girls attending university, and with leaders like you who are making their dreams possible. And the question today is how all of you and young people like you will steer Africa’s course to embrace that future,” Obama said.

Not long before that, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, chair of the African Union Commission, had a similar message. “We need much greater commitment and action to empower women and girls in

the process of eradicating hunger, poverty and promoting development. Furthermore, there is need to give special attention to increasing the participation of women in decision-making in all areas of life, as a means of improving the quality of decision-making ... including in the protection of the environment and wildlife.”

March 8, International Women’s Day, is celebrated the world over. Sadly, for many girls and women, opportunities are far from within reach. Their battles in every aspect of life — at work, school or home — are silent and painful. Imagine that every single mistake or bad thing that happens in a family becomes blame thrown at a female family member. Will younger female members of that family be treated with respect and dignity as they mature into adulthood? How will their self-esteem be high enough so they can be confident and competitive?

“At the current pace, it will take 81 years to achieve gender parity in economic participation, and some 50 years to reach parity in parliamentary representation,” [U.N. Women](#) reports.

Hope


Yet, there is hope. We have each other. We also have strong support from the men who understand us.

“A truly strong, powerful man isn’t threatened by a strong, powerful woman,” the first lady said.

In an opinion piece published on International Women’s Day, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said, “While their work may not always make the front pages, women are confronting our most pressing global issues. At great personal risk, they are fighting poverty, discrimination and violence so that their families, communities and countries can have better lives.”

“I see the power of women every day in every country that I visit,” he said.

This year, sustainable development goals (SDGs) will build upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs were about quantity. SDGs will enhance quality. [MDG3](#) set out to “promote gender equality and empower women.” [SDG5](#) will push efforts to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.”

Runners reach the finish line at 

Ethiopia’s 2015 Women First run on
International Women’s Day March 8.

Including women in decision-making can double if not triple a nation’s economic and human development. This is true here in Africa.


At the International Conference on the Emergence of Africa held in Abidjan in March, UNDP chief [Helen Clark](#) proposed a way forward for Africa. “By reducing inequalities, African countries will lift human development and will harness the full potential of women and currently marginalized groups to contribute to development,” she said.

Much remains to be done. Whatever comes of these efforts, women who are able will play a key role in bringing other young girls and women along. So what will our revised route for the better be?

"If you keep positive and optimistic about what can be done, [things] do work out," said former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

For my part I pledged on [#Africa4Her](#) to work in partnership with my alma mater, Addis Ababa University, to help young women students build confidence and set goals for while they are at school and later in the workplace. I will help them gain access to a network of pioneering professional women with whom they can talk about the challenges they face. This will help them begin to develop internship opportunities and long-term mentor relationships.

[Everyone Has a Role to Play](#)

For three days, from March 24th through 26th, Alvin Allgood engaged with the YALI Network  in a #YALICHAT on the issues, obstacles that have kept women and girls from educational opportunities, and the ability to develop professionally. The Vital Voices chief operating officer brought his expansive and informed view of the issue to the YALI Network as part of the March focus on investing in women and girls. In responding to questions and comments from the YALI Network, he also discussed ideas and solutions for creating real change that will allow women and girls to "achieve their full potential."

Read his blog on empowering women and girls [here](#).

Several questions from Network members acknowledged the entrenched prejudices and stereotypes that have prevented women and girls from playing a role in society. Questions and comments noted the resistance to educational opportunity and gender bias, particularly among men. In response to one post, Allgood stated that, "Changing culture takes time, and educating all youth is key to long term progress. It would also be useful to look at examples from other neighboring communities as learning lessons for how they have dealt with gender stereotypes."

But many Network members admitted that men are important to changing this attitude and that it is not up to women alone. Allgood remarked that, "As a father it is my duty to ensure that my son and daughter grow up respecting all of human kind. I am happy to see the younger generations being more and more color and gender blind. Women can inspire men and they often times do. Men should not be threatened by womens rights but accepting and bold to stand alongside them."

As one Network member put it, "It is the duty of everyone, including men in sound positions to create a platform and investment for the education and empowerment of women. We owe it our women and humanity at large."

Creating opportunities for women entrepreneurship was another area of interest for Network members. Many identified this as critical to your community's and country's economic health. Allgood agreed. "Through our work at Vital Voices, we have found that despite the proven benefits

of women's economic engagement, women business owners still face disproportionate barriers. As the future leaders of the continent, I encourage you to advocate for women's economic empowerment in your communities. It is not only right, it is also smart economics."


In signing off from his #YALICHAT, Allgood had praise and a further challenge for the YALI Network.

"Thank you again for taking the time to participate in this [#YALICHAT](#). Your comments and questions have inspired me, and I hope that my responses have done the same. Collaborating and networking are critical to affecting real change. Collectively we can make a difference. We have been reminded this week that words alone are not enough and that we have to be willing to take bold steps. As you make this pledge to invest in women and girls, be sure to invite your fellow network members and think about what you can achieve together."


#Africa4Her: Ten Exemplary Pledges to Invest in Women and Girls

This March, YALI Network members have made the commitment to invest in women and girls in Africa, not only to help achieve gender equality, but also to promote economic growth, good governance, and future innovation. Women and girls are often the foundation of a community, and it is essential that they are given the same opportunities as men for that nation to grow. More than 700 YALI Network members pledged to invest in women and girls, and many of these pledges have already been put into action. Below is just a sample of the amazing and creative pledges that were made this month.

1. Leadership development training for 25 Cameroonian women; create Young Women's Advocacy Network:

Patience Agwenjang from Cameroon pledges to organize a six-month leadership development training course for 25 women and to create the Young Women's Advocacy Network to support effective policy on gender issues and good governance. 

2. Mentor young female victims of human trafficking in Nigeria:

Lawrenta Igoh from Nigeria pledges to mentor girls who have been victims of human trafficking by organizing training sessions on reproductive health and life-building skills to help prepare them to adjust to society and decrease their vulnerability to being re-trafficked. 

3. Feature business women in an entrepreneurship magazine:

Mothibedi Sereme from South Africa pledges to help young women through a local entrepreneurship magazine that he publishes by featuring articles and bios on successful female entrepreneurs. He

will also host a seminar on leadership and higher education for young women at which inspiring businesswomen will speak to girls about their role in the economy and the importance of education.

4. Empower young women through poetry:

Mercedes Leburu pledges to help empower other young women in South Africa to become confident and lead a liberated lifestyle through writing poetry that will boost their self-esteem.

5. Educate young girls about protected sex and how to grow produce successfully:

Noel Lutomia in Kenya pledges to help young women start small income-generating projects, such as small crop farming, that would earn them independence from men and decrease their vulnerability to sexual predators.



6. Help girls continue their education by providing sanitary napkins:

James Obare Ondongo from Kenya pledges to help increase the chances for girls' education in two primary schools by distributing sanitary napkins so girls can attend school regularly during their monthly cycles.



7. Organize art workshops to help women network and empower them through their own creativity:

Kunle Adewale from Nigeria pledges to invest in women by holding workshops with a focus on therapeutic art and vocational skills. The art produced at these workshops will be publicly displayed and put up for auction, with the profits going directly back to the women and girls who participate.

8. Hold a conference for young women in business to expand their horizons and share ideas:

Nathacia Oliver from South Africa pledges to initiate the first "Young Women Thrive" business conference, where young female entrepreneurs can gather to network and collaborate on new and exciting business ideas.

9. Tutor female classmates in a course:

Samuel Ndhlovu from Zambia pledges to assist two of his classmates in a course that he is doing well in by tutoring them three days a week.


10. Organize a training workshop for women in small-scale dairy production:

Khalid Ngassa from Tanzania pledges to organize and host a four-day training workshop for women who run small-scale dairy production operations as a part of the Nronga Women's Dairy Cooperative Society. He will teach them about business efficiency and how to maximize their profits using their available resources.

What Role Will You Play?

By: Alvin Allgood

I am proud to have this opportunity to engage with you all and look forward to our #YALICHAT on investing in women and girls.

Alvin Allgood is the chief operating  officer of Vital Voices. He has more than 25 years of leadership and management experience.

Everyone has a role to play when it comes to investing in women and girls. I believe that your generation has already made a mark. You're known for your curiosity, creativity and refusal to accept systems that no longer work. You see problems and you fearlessly work to create solutions. You use technology to relate in ways we couldn't have imagined even 10 years ago. You aren't bound by convention, and you're not satisfied with just accumulating wealth or power. Maybe more than any generation that's come before you, you're motivated to contribute to the larger social good — to do well while doing good.

It's this motivation that convinces the rest of us that you will improve on the world you're inheriting, and solve some of the biggest problems we face.

This month the world turns its attention to one of the greatest challenges of our time: the universal inequality that keeps women and girls from achieving their full potential. Each March on International Women's Day, global organizations, national officials and local leaders recommit to investing in solutions that work. At Vital Voices, this is what we do each and every day.

For more than 18 years, Vital Voices has been investing in women leaders who improve the world. We find women who have a vision for a better world and demonstrate leadership that unites and inspires others. Then we partner with them to help make that vision a reality.


We work with leaders in three key areas: human rights, economic opportunity, and political and public leadership. These women are in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East.

We make long-term investments in each leader and design programs that offer practical skills and services. We connect them with expert advisers for mentoring and collaboration, and support them in telling their stories and sharing their perspectives.

Together, these interventions increase a leader's capacity and expand her access to opportunity. They enable a leader to accelerate the impact she is having on the ground, realize her vision, and improve not just her community, but the world beyond.

As a member of the YALI Network, you're linked to more than 130,000 of your peers. You're part of a community with the potential to educate, motivate and have a lasting impact — both online and off.

I know firsthand the power of a network like yours. Throughout my career, I've seen what a determined group of leaders can achieve when they work together toward a shared goal. Before joining Vital Voices, I spent more than 20 years in the education sector innovating, improving and expanding educational services to prevent dropouts and create solutions around problems that have put our youth at risk. This was only possible through collaboration.

Through his work with Vital Voices,  Allgood is helping to create a global network of women leaders.

What we see every day at Vital Voices is that real leadership leads to collective empowerment. Every woman leader we invest in makes it her mission to reinvest in the rising generation. By sharing access, information and opportunity, the women we partner with are empowering other women and girls. It's this collaboration and cycle of impact that improves communities around the world.

When you consider making a pledge to invest in women and girls, look first to your fellow network members and think about what you can achieve together.

As you work to strengthen and expand your various entrepreneurial ventures, I urge you to leverage the networks and technology you have available to make ambitious pledges to empower the women and girls in your communities.

I look forward to reading your comments and answering any questions you have during the #YALICHAT.

Alvin Allgood is the chief operating officer of Vital Voices. He has more than 25 years of leadership and management experience, particularly in the education sector. Mr. Allgood is a veteran of the U.S. Army and has earned a bachelor's degree in advertising and public relations as well as a master's degree in organizational management.

[#YALICHAT with the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, Cathy Russell](#)

Cathy Russell serves as the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Previously she served at the White House, coordinating the development of the Obama Administration's strategy to prevent and respond to gender-based violence globally. Join Ambassador Russell ([@AmbCathyRussell](#)) for a Twitter #YALICHAT on Wednesday, March 18th at 13:00 UTC. Additional

details below.



u
ssell visits girls at a school in Zambia

As young African leaders and followers of the YALI Network, you already know that the United States invests in women and girls because it's the right thing to do for gender equality and the smart thing to do for our foreign policy.

When policies and programs consider women and girls, they're more successful. They promote stronger democracies and more durable peace agreements. They increase food security and make for healthier families. They improve public service delivery. And they lead to fewer conflicts and more rapidly growing economies.

As the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, it's my job to work with my colleagues across the U.S. government and with leaders around the world to advance the status of women and girls worldwide. Every day I talk with government officials, world leaders, and women and girls around the world about how women have contributed to global progress and why we need to break the barriers keeping women and girls from fully participating in society.

Earlier this month, I had the privilege of presenting ten women from ten countries with the Secretary of State's [International Women of Courage Award](#). These women, including Marie Claire Tchecola from Guinea and Beatrice Epaye from the Central African Republic, have shown exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for women's rights and empowerment.

As an emergency room nurse in Guinea, Marie Claire Tchecola has been on the front lines of the fight against Ebola. When she became infected with the Ebola virus, she took precautions to protect other workers and her family from contracting the disease - and when she recovered, she went back to work. Through her leadership in the Ebola Survivors Association of Guinea, Marie Claire continues to spread awareness about the disease and fight the stigma associated with its survivors.

When Seleka rebels stormed the streets of Bangui and overtook the Central African Republic's capital, one of their first stops was the office of Beatrice Epaye, an outspoken activist who raised her

voice to condemn the horrors of civil war and to call for peace, human rights, and good governance. Refusing to be intimidated, Beatrice took to the radio and met with local and international organizations, eventually becoming the president of the Preparatory Committee for the National Dialogue.

Ms. Tchecola and Ms. Epaye are proof of how women can and do transform societies with little fanfare through their everyday actions. Yet in every country – from Guinea to Germany to Guatemala – women and girls face challenges and barriers that keep them from fully participating. A family may choose to send a son, but not a daughter, to school because there's only enough money for one child's fees. A woman may be kept from launching a new business because she can't access capital. Or bias and stereotypes about women's roles in society will keep a woman from her rightful seat at the peacekeeping table or in Parliament.

It will take all of us – men and women, boys and girls – to achieve the progress we need to unleash the power of women and girls. But if every one of us takes action, we can break down these barriers and open doors for women and girls of courage.

I urge you all, both my fellow women and our male allies, to [take the #Africa4Her pledge](#) and tell us how you will invest in women and girls. Show us how you will raise, educate, protect, support, mentor, and elevate the many women and girls of courage in your life.

Join the YALICHAT on Wednesday, March 18th at:

12:00-13:00 Cape Verde Time (CVT)

13:00-14:00 UTC/GMT

14:00-15:00 West Africa Time (WAT)

15:00-16:00 Central Africa (CAT) and South Africa Standard Time (SAST)

18:00-19:00 Eastern Africa Time (EAT)

19:00-20:00 Seychelles and Mauritius (SCT/MUT)

Nigerian Seeks Justice Against Domestic Abuse


“The change we so desire in the world today starts with each one of us. Don't give up.”

— Naomi Osemedua

Naomi Osemedua says it should be easier for women to speak out about gender violence.

“Victims are afraid to come out and talk, as they are afraid of stigmatization,” she explains. “They are afraid that when they come out people will say they are useless or that whatever happened to

them was their fault.

Naomi Osemedua, center, stands up for 
justice with fellow anti-abuse advocates
in Abuja, Nigeria.

As in many cultures, women in Nigeria are often blamed for their own abuse, with critics suggesting their clothes or appearance provoked the assault or violence. Osemedua, a YALI Network member, founded the Nigerian branch of Making a Difference (M.A.D.) Positive International in Abuja in 2011 to break the silence surrounding sexual abuse and domestic violence. The organization's work extends beyond the capital city to Lagos and Abeokuta and to the rural areas of Kwara, Delta and Rivers states.

Osemedua, 36 and an abuse victim herself, has positive messages for women and youth — that they can become agents for social change.

"We must not talk alone but create action," she says.

The advocate constantly responds to requests for information about abuse and provides inspiration to help stop it. She regularly appears as a guest on local radio programs using passion and humor when talking about abuse, girls' education and other women's issues. She reaches out to women and girls, men and boys through social media as well as public and private partner organizations like WellBeing Foundation Africa, Project Pink Blue and GenVoices.


Although Osemedua estimates that so far those efforts have reached more than 10,000 women, it's not enough.

"It has been overwhelming because when you think you have started, you discover that you have not even scratched the surface," she explains.

Through M.A.D., in 2014 Osemedua helped organize Nigeria's "1 Billion Rising for Justice" event to demand justice for women who have been sexually assaulted. Organizers of the event, which happened on February 14 in cities around the world, proclaimed, "I refuse to stand by as more than 1 billion women experience violence. ... I am rising for justice."

In Abuja people danced to the words of the "1 Billion Rising for Justice" anthem, which includes these words: "I can see a world where we all live, safe and free from all oppression. No more rape or incest or abuse. Women are not a possession."

Osemedua is confident that change is on the horizon and that gender-based violence will end. "It may take time, but it will be worth the wait as people are searching for sincere and genuine change-makers," she says.

Naomi Osemedua, right, is interviewed 
by a member of the local media in Abuja,
Nigeria.

Osemedua contributes to her community in other ways. The YALI Network member is active in the

government's YouWin! Program, serving as a volunteer mentor for entrepreneurs ages 18 to 45. She also works with a leadership academy for girls ages 10 to 14 that focuses on leadership development. She says her work with the academy has been fulfilling.

"The work is important because these young girls will be the leaders of tomorrow, and there is no telling how far the impact will go. We believe that one girl can change the world."

"Other YALI network members can help girls in their communities by mentoring them. Even if it is just one girl at a time. ... with one girl, over time much can be achieved," she adds. "We hope that through our work with these girls that each one of them will indeed have a sense of true leadership and settle for nothing less than the best that they can be."

One of five siblings, the new mother credits her father with being her "greatest supporter and inspiration. She says her father "continually lavished love and affection on all of us ... [and] made sure we had the best education."

Osemedua says she has been "greatly inspired" by the YALI Network. "Just reading about all the great stuff others are doing makes me want to do more for my community and the world."

A [video](#) of Nigeria's 2014 1 Billion Rising for Justice dance event is available on YouTube. The song's lyrics are available on the 1 Billion Rising for Justice [website](#).

10 Reasons to Invest in Women and Girls

A girl at the Kakenya Center for Excellence in Kenya smiles after receiving her school uniform. 

They're your mothers and your daughters, your sisters and your aunts, your cousins and your friends. There are so many reasons to invest in them, besides the fact that you love them. Here are 10:

1. **More inclusive government.** If you'd like to see less fighting among your elected officials, encourage women to run for public office. According to USAID, countries where women hold at least 30 percent of political seats are more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic.
2. **Improved public service delivery.** The next time you're frustrated by poor roads or a lack of potable water, vote for a woman. USAID reports that women's political participation increases cooperation across party and ethnic lines and government responsiveness to citizens.
3. **Greater farm production.** The UN's Food and Agricultural Organization found that by empowering women farmers with the same access to land, new technologies and capital as men, crop yields could be increased by as much as 30 percent.
4. **Fewer hungry people.** When women succeed, society succeeds. Nowhere is that more clear than in food production. In that same report, the Food and Agricultural Organization estimates

that a 30 percent boost in production can reduce the number of hungry people by 150 million.


5. **Increased buying power.** As the World Bank's chief economist, Lawrence Summers said, "Investment in girls' education may well be the highest return investment available in the developing world." Each year of secondary school boosts a girl's future earning power by roughly 20 percent.
 6. **Stronger economies.** Educating a girl pays dividends for her family and her country, too. According to USAID, when 10 percent more girls go to school, a country's GDP increases on average by 3 percent.
 7. **Fewer child deaths.** Women who are educated are better able to take care of themselves and their children. According to UNESCO, a child born to a mother who can read is 50 percent more likely to live past age five.
 8. **Less HIV/AIDS.** For UNICEF, education is essential to slowing the spread of HIV/AIDS. That's because girls who are better educated are less likely to engage in casual sex.
 9. **Fewer conflicts.** When women's lives are valued, their experiences considered and their voices heard, better outcomes prevail. Through its peacekeeping operations, the UN has found that when women are included, deadly conflicts can be avoided.
 10. **More lasting peace.** Women have an important role to play in driving reconciliation and reconstruction. According to the UN, including women in conflict negotiation and peacebuilding efforts can lead to more widely accepted and durable peace agreements.
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Replay: First Lady's Remarks on Women and Girls

Most times, a speech suits the time, place and audience for which it was intended. But sometimes, a speech transcends that time, space and audience. First lady Michelle Obama's speech at the 2014 summit of the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders is one of those speeches. With honesty and vigor, she addressed the need to change attitudes and beliefs about women and girls. Here are some of her remarks.

[...]

Today, I want us to talk — and I mean really talk. I want to speak as openly and honestly as possible about the issues we care about and what it means to be a leader, not just in Africa but in the world today.

First lady Michelle Obama speaks to  participants of the Presidential Summit for the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders in Washington on July 30, 2014.

Now, one of the issues that I care deeply about is [...] girls' education. And across the globe, the statistics on this issue are heartbreaking. Right now, 62 million girls worldwide are not in school, including nearly 30 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa. And as we saw in Pakistan, where Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head by Taliban gunmen, and in Nigeria where more than 200 girls were kidnapped from their school dormitory by Boko Haram terrorists, even when girls do attend school, they often do so at great risk.

And as my husband said earlier this week, we know that when girls aren't educated, that doesn't just limit their prospects, leaving them more vulnerable to poverty, violence and disease, it limits the prospects of their families and their countries as well.

Now, in recent years, there's been a lot of talk about how to address this issue, and how we need more schools and teachers, more money for toilets and uniforms, transportation, school fees. And of course, all of these issues are critically important, and I could give a perfectly fine speech today about increasing investments in girls' education around the world.

But I said I wanted to be honest. And if I do that, we all know that the problem here isn't only about resources, it's also about attitudes and beliefs. It's about whether fathers and mothers think their daughters are as worthy of an education as their sons. It's about whether societies cling to outdated laws and traditions that oppress and exclude women, or whether they view women as full citizens entitled to fundamental rights.

So the truth is, I don't think it's really productive to talk about issues like girls' education unless we're willing to have a much bigger, bolder conversation about how women are viewed and treated in the world today. And we need to be having this conversation on every continent and in every country on this planet. And that's what I want to do today with all of you, because so many of you are already leading the charge for progress in Africa.

Now, as an African-American woman, this conversation is deeply personal to me. The roots of my family tree are in Africa. As you know, my husband's father was born and raised in Kenya — and members of our extended family still live there. I have had the pleasure of traveling to Africa a number of times over the years, including four trips as first lady, and I have brought my mother and my daughters along with me whenever I can. So believe me, the blood of Africa runs through my veins, and I care deeply about Africa's future.

Now, the status of women in Africa is also personal to me as a woman. See, what I want you all to understand is that I am who I am today because of the people in my family — particularly the men in my family — who valued me and invested in me from the day I was born. I had a father, a brother, uncles, grandfathers who encouraged me and challenged me, protected me, and told me that I was smart and strong and beautiful.

And as I grew up, the men who raised me set a high bar for the type of men I'd allow into my life — which is why I went on to marry a man who had the good sense to fall in love with a woman who was his equal — and to treat me as such. A man who supports and reveres me, and who supports and reveres our daughters as well.

And throughout my life — understand this — every opportunity I've had, every achievement I'm proud of has stemmed from this solid foundation of love and respect. So given these experiences, it


saddens and confuses me to see that too often, women in some parts of Africa are still denied the rights and opportunities they deserve to realize their potential.

Now, let's be very clear: In many countries in Africa, women have made tremendous strides. More girls are attending school. More women are starting businesses. Maternal mortality has plummeted. And more women are serving in parliaments than ever before. In fact, in some countries, more than 30 percent of legislators are women. In Rwanda, it's over 50 percent — which, by the way, is more than double the percentage of women in the U.S. Congress.

Now, these achievements represent remarkable progress. But at the same time, when girls in some places are still being married off as children, sometimes before they even reach puberty; when female genital mutilation still continues in some countries; when human trafficking, rape and domestic abuse are still too common, and perpetrators are often facing no consequences for their crimes — then we still have some serious work to do in Africa and across the globe.

And while I have great respect for cultural differences, I think we can all agree that practices like genital cutting, forced child marriage, domestic violence are not legitimate cultural practices, they are serious human rights violations and have no place in any country on this Earth. These practices have no place in our shared future, because we all know that our future lies in our people — in their talent, their ambition, their drive. And no country can ever truly flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of the contributions of half of its citizens.

And I know this firsthand from the history of my own country. A century ago, women in America weren't allowed to vote. Decades ago, it was perfectly legal for employers to refuse to hire women. Domestic violence was viewed not as a crime, but as a private family matter between a man and his wife.

First lady Michelle Obama hugs a  participant of the Presidential Summit for the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders in Washington on July 30, 2014.

But in each generation, people of conscience stood up and rejected these unjust practices. They chained themselves to the White House gates, waged hunger strikes in prison to win the right to vote. They took their bosses to court. They spoke out about rape and fought to prosecute rapists, despite the stigma and shame. They left their abusive husbands, even when that meant winding up on the streets with their children.

And today in America, we see the results of those hard-fought battles: 60 percent of college students today are women. Women are now more than half the workforce. And in recent decades, women's employment has added nearly \$2 trillion to the U.S. economy — yes, trillion.

Now, are we anywhere near full economic, political, and domestic equality in the United States? Absolutely not. We still struggle every day with serious issues like violence against women, unequal pay. Women are still woefully underrepresented in our government and in the senior ranks of our corporations.

But slowly, generation after generation, we've been moving in the right direction because of brave individuals who were willing to risk their jobs, their reputations, and even their lives to achieve equality. And it wasn't just brave women who made these sacrifices. It was also brave men, too — men who hired women, men who passed laws to empower women, men who prosecuted other men who abused women.

So to all the men, my brothers here today, I have a simple message: We need you to shake things up. Too often, women are fighting these battles alone, but men like you, progressive men who are already ahead of the curve on women's issues, you all are critically important to solving this problem.

And that starts by doing a little introspection. And I say this not just to the 250 of you who are in the room today, but to men around the world. Men in every country need to look into their hearts and souls and ask themselves whether they truly view and treat women as their equals. And then when you all encounter men in your lives who answer no to that question, then you need to take them to task. You need to tell them that any man who uses his strength to oppress women is a coward, and he is holding back the progress of his family and his country.

Tell them that a truly strong, powerful man isn't threatened by a strong, powerful woman. Instead, he is challenged by her, he is inspired by her, he is pleased to relate to her as an equal. And I want you to keep modeling that behavior yourselves by promoting women in your companies, passing laws to empower women in your countries, and holding the same ambitious dreams for your daughters as you do for your sons.

And to the women here, my sisters [...] I want us as women to understand that oppression is not a one-way street.

See, too often, without even realizing it, we as women internalize the oppression we face in our societies by believing harmful messages about how we should look and act, particularly as women of color — messages that tell us that we're ugly or irrelevant, that we don't deserve full control over our bodies, that we should keep our mouths shut and just do as we're told. And then, too often, we turn around and impose those same beliefs on other women and girls in our lives, including our own daughters.

For example, in countries across the globe, there are women who still support and carry out the practice of genital cutting. There are women who are still insisting on marrying off their young daughters or keeping them home from school to help with the housework.

And then there are the more subtle harms that we afflict — inflict on each other — the harm of spurning our sisters who don't conform to traditions because we're jealous or suspicious of their courage and their freedom; the harm of turning a blind eye when a woman in our community is being abused because we don't want to cause conflict with our neighbors by speaking up.

And I imagine that for some of you here today, getting your degree might have meant disobeying or disappointing your families. Maybe while you've been acing your studies and thriving in your career, you have a grandmother who has been wringing her hands because you're not yet married.

But, my sisters, you all are here today because you have found a way to overcome these challenges,

and you have blossomed into powerful, accomplished women. And we need you all to help others do the same.


All of us, men and women on every continent, we all need to identify these problems in ourselves and in our communities, and then commit to solving them. And I say this to you not just as lawyers and activists and business leaders, but as current and future parents. Because as a mother myself, I can tell you that this is where change truly happens. With the behavior we model, with our actions and inactions, every day, we as parents shape the values of the next generation.

For example, my parents never had the chance to attend university, but they had the courage and foresight to push me to get the best education I could. And they weren't threatened by the prospect of me having more opportunities than they had — just the opposite. They were thrilled.

And that's what should drive us all: the hope of raising the next generation to be stronger, smarter and bolder than our generation. And that is exactly the kind of work that so many of you are already doing in your families and your communities, which is why I'm so proud of you.

[...]

This is where Africa's future lies — with those women-run businesses, with those girls attending university, and with leaders like you who are making those dreams possible. And the question today is how all of you and young people like you will steer Africa's course to embrace that future.

First lady Michelle Obama speaks to 
selected participants of the Presidential
Summit for the Washington Fellowship for
Young African Leaders in Washington on July
30, 2014, during a roundtable discussion.

Because ultimately, that's what leadership is really about. It's not just about holding degrees or holding elected office. And it's not about preserving our own power or continuing traditions that oppress and exclude.

Leadership is about creating new traditions that honor the dignity and humanity of every individual. Leadership is about empowering all of our people — men, women, boys and girls — to fulfill every last bit of their God-given potential. And when we commit to that kind of leadership across the globe, that is when we truly start making progress on girls' education. Because that's when families in small villages around the world will demand equal opportunities for their daughters. They won't wait. That's when countries will willingly and generously invest in sending their girls to school, because they'll know how important it is.

And we all know the ripple effects we can have when we give our girls a chance to learn. We all know that girls who are educated earn higher wages. They're more likely to stand up to discrimination and abuse. They have healthier children who are more likely to attend school themselves.

So no matter where you all work, no matter what issue you focus on — whether it's health or microfinance, human rights or clean energy — women's equality must be a central part of your work.

It must. Because make no mistake about it, the work of transforming attitudes about women, it now falls on your shoulders. And it's up to you all to embrace the future. [...]

And I know this won't be easy. I know that you will face all kinds of obstacles and resistance — you already have. But when you get tired or frustrated, when things seem hopeless and you start thinking about giving up, I want you to remember the words of the man whom your fellowship is now named — and I know these words have been spoken many times. As Madiba once said, "It always seems impossible until it is done." And I, oh, I know the truth of those words from my own history and from the history of my country.

My ancestors came here in chains. My parents and grandparents knew the sting of segregation and discrimination. Yet I attended some of the best universities in this country. I had career opportunities beyond my wildest dreams. And today, I live in the White House, a building — but we must remember, we live in a home that was constructed by slaves.

Today, I watch my daughters — two beautiful African-American girls — walking our dogs in the shadow of the Oval Office. And today, I have the privilege of serving and representing the United States of America across the globe.

So my story and the story of my country is the story of the impossible getting done. And I know that can be your story and that can be Africa's story too. But it will take new energy, it will take new ideas, new leadership from young people like you. That is why we brought you here today.

We've done this because we believe in Africa, and we believe in all of you. And understand we are filled with so much hope and so many expectations for what you will achieve. You hold the future of your continent in your hands, and I cannot wait to see everything you will continue to accomplish in the years ahead.
